

## **Factors Influencing the Foreign Undergraduates' Intention to Study at Graduate School of a Public University**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The higher education sector in Malaysia is experiencing stiff competition. Both public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) are required to teach, educate as well as to survive economically. Thus, the ability to attract students, either local or foreign, has become a crucial advantage. However, research looking into foreign students' perceptions on graduate school selection is still very lacking in the local setting. Thus, this study aims to identify the factors that influence the foreign undergraduates' intention to study at graduate school and to verify their relationships. The results indicated that location, low cost, university reputations, academic programs, learning facilities and country image were having significant relationships with foreign undergraduates' intention to study at graduate school. However, family/peers influence was the only factor that did not have any significant relationship. HEI operators are therefore recommended to focus on the previous six factors, but should pay less attention to the latter. Recommendations for future research have also been put forth in this paper.

**Keywords:** *Graduate school, Intention, International, Undergraduates, University*

### **Introduction**

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia are under the supervision of Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). According to Department of Higher Education (JPT)(2008), the HEIs in Malaysia are guided by five aims: (i) To fulfil the need for skilled and qualified human capital; (ii) To fulfil the national needs in critical areas vital to the country; (iii) To meet the national demand to restructure the Malaysian multicultural communities; (iv) To meet the current demands of the people of Malaysia on the medium of instruction in tertiary education and; (v) To enable Malaysia to compete in this era of globalization. Besides implementing their main duties to teach, train and educate to fulfill the aims of National Philosophy of Education (NPE), HEIs are expected to perform economically to survive. As such, they are competing intensively for student enrollments, both local and foreign, for the survival of their business.

The intense competition in the higher education sector in Malaysia can be seen from the number of existing HEI operators in the country. Currently, there are 20 public universities, 27 public polytechnics and 70 public community colleges in operations, offering various types of

courses ranging from certificate to doctoral degrees (MOHE, 2010). As for the private higher education sector, there are approximately 470 HEIs in practice currently, ranging from shop-lot-non-university-status institutions to well-equipped universities, conducting certificate to doctoral programs (MOHE, 2010). Due to the competitive landscape of higher education sector in the country, it is important for all the HEI operators to understand the perceptions of prospective students on factors influencing their choice of HEIs, particularly universities.

Over the years, various researchers have conducted numerous studies to identify the factors affecting the students in choosing HEIs. Factors such as location, cost, academic programs, advertising efforts, career prospects, parents' influences etc. were deemed to be capable in influencing people's choice of HEI (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Keskinen *et al.*, 2008; Tucciarone, 2008; Daily *et al.*, 2010; Ivy, 2010; Johnston, 2010). Nonetheless, those studies were conducted in foreign countries; thus, the applicability of those studies in our country has definitely become an issue. As such, some similar studies are required to be done at the local setting.

To date, there are only a handful of studies have been performed in Malaysia on students' choice of HEIs. For instance, Syed Yasin *et al.* (2009), Wagner and Fard (2009) and Fernandez (2010) have investigated only the local students' perceptions on university selection. However, study focuses specifically on foreign students' perceptions are still very limited. As most of the studies performed previously were using local students as the sample, some efforts to extend the sample to include foreign students are needed.

To add to the above, most of the researches were carried out to study the students' choice of HEIs for undergraduate programs, for examples Daily *et al.* (2010), Fernandez (2010) and Johnston (2010), just to name a few. As post-graduate programs also play an important role in the higher education sector, it is also important for the HEIs to understand what cause the students to study in their graduate schools. Furthermore, students may also have different needs and wants in choosing graduate schools; thus, their perceptions pertaining to the issue requires close scrutiny.

In short, understanding of students' intention to study at graduate school, particularly among the foreign students, is indeed required further investigation. Considering the above mentioned limitations and gaps, this study looks into several issues: (i) What are the factors influencing the foreign undergraduates' intention to study at graduate school? (ii) Are there any relationships between the influencing factors and foreign undergraduates' intention to study at graduate school?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Higher Education Sector in Malaysia***

The higher education in Malaysia can be divided into two main sectors, namely the public sector and the private sector. The first public university in Malaysia, University of Malaya (UM), was established in 1961, followed by the second university, Science University of Malaysia (USM) in 1969. In later years, several universities were built up in order to accommodate the growth in higher education demand until the most recent university, National Defence University of Malaysia (UPNM), was established in 2006. Government has also taken the efforts to categorize the public universities into research universities, focused universities and comprehensive universities. Each of the categories has its very own functions

and specialties. In addition to universities, Malaysian government has established polytechnics and community colleges to provide technical and vocational education at the tertiary level to the young generations (JPT, 2008).

The development of private HEIs was started in 1950s and they played an important role in substituting the public HEIs and providing other choices to the students. In 1990s, due to the economic recession, private HEIs were allowed to manage their academic programs in collaboration with foreign universities by offering “twinning programs”. Since then, private HEIs have mushroomed in the country. Currently, there are about 470 private HEIs in operations, which include universities, university colleges, and non-university institutions, offering a wide range of academic programs (JPT, 2008). The number of public and private HEIs in the country, as at 2010, is summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Public and Private Higher Education Institutions (2010)**

	<b>Public</b>	<b>Private</b>
University	20	23
Branch with university status	-	24
Branch from foreign university	-	5
University College	-	21
Polytechnics	27	-
Community College	70	-
Non-university institutions	-	403
<b>Total</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>476</b>

Source: MOHE (2010)

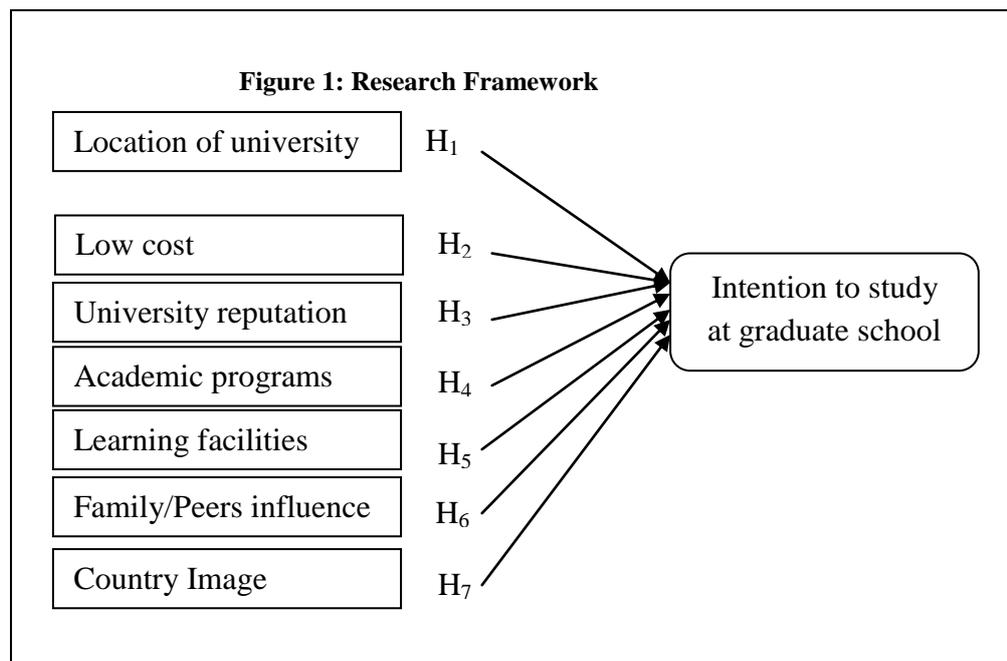
The rapid development in both public and private HEIs has intensified the competitive condition in the higher education sector. As such, gaining greater number of students has become an important strategy for HEIs to survive and thrive in the business. Besides attracting local students, HEIs nowadays are expected to attract more foreign students. It is important for HEIs to get more foreign students not only for survival of business, but also to help the country to transform itself into an international higher education hub of excellent. In terms of the programs offered, HEIs are expected to provide undergraduate as well as post-graduate programs to fulfill the increasing higher education demand from the people. As such, it is important for the HEI operators to understand what factors are influencing students’ choice of HEIs, especially in choosing a graduate school.

In this study, foreign students can be defined as non-Malaysia students enrolled for undergraduate programs, specifically degree programs of various academic fields. Meanwhile, post-graduate programs can be defined as any tertiary educational programs offered at post-graduate diploma, master and doctoral degree levels.

***Research Framework***

Ajzen (1991) defines intention as the indication of how hard people are willing to try, or how much effort people are planning to exert, in order to perform a behavior. It is believed that the stronger the intention, the more likely the behavior will be performed. Most importantly, intention is affected by several factors; either internally or externally.

Previous studies have successfully showed that students’ choice of university was affected by institutional factors, such as location, programs, cost, facilities, reputation and others (Veloutsou *et al.*, 2004; Ancheh *et al.*, 2007; Lei and Chuang, 2010; Sia, 2010;). However, some studies have identified several external factors, such as third party influence and country image were able to influence students’ decisions (Gray *et al.*, 2003; Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Ismail *et al.*, 2007; Wagner and Fard, 2009). As a result, in this study, five institutional factors (location of university, low cost, university reputation, academic programs and learning facilities) together with two external factors (parents/peers influence and country image) serve as the independent variables. Meanwhile, intention to study post-graduate programs serves as the dependent variable. Figure 1 illustrates the research framework and the variables are discussed in the following part.



***Location of University***

Location is always a factor that affects students’ choice of university. A university that has a strategic location could be a major attribute to influence the students’ decisions in choosing the university to further their studies. For instance, Sia (2010) in her conceptual framework has suggested that students may choose a college which is near to their home. Other researchers that have identified the same factor were such as Keskinen (2008) from Finland and Padlee *et al.* (2010) from Malaysia. Thus, the university that has a strategic location can be a major factor that influences the intention of international students to study post-graduate programs. Therefore, the following hypothesis can be suggested:

***H<sub>1</sub>: There is a relationship between location and intention to study at graduate school.***

### ***Low Cost***

Cost or pricing is an influential factor that should not be neglected in the studies of students' choice of HEIs. Researchers have found out that majority of the students were cost-conscious, in which they preferred to register in HEI offering quality courses at low costs (Ancheh *et al.*, 2007; Fernandez, 2010; Sia, 2010). Specifically, Wagner and Fard (2009) proposed that HEI administrators, marketers and policy makers should focus on the cost of education in promoting their programs. Padlee *et al.* (2010) also supported the above views by including "cost of education", such as tuition fee, accommodation fee, exchange rate etc. as one of the seven factors that determined the decision-making process by the international students. Nowadays, students are being smart in spending their money on education. As low cost can be an influential factor in students' choice of university, the following hypothesis is made:

***H<sub>2</sub>: There is a relationship between low cost and intention to study at graduate school.***

### ***University Reputation***

University reputation has a tremendous effect in affecting students' choice of university. For instance, Jager and Soontiens (2009) have found that South African students perceived institutional reputation as one of the important attributes in choosing universities. Similarly, Daily *et al.* (2010) also reported that reputation of the institution was one of the most important attribute for international students to pursue a business degree in the U.S. The importance of institutional reputation has also been mentioned in studies done by Ancheh *et al.* (2007), O'Brien *et al.* (2007) and Sia (2010). They have unanimously pointed out that institutional reputation was a powerful factor in affecting students' choice of HEIs. Thus, the following hypothesis can be developed:

***H<sub>3</sub>: There is a relationship between university reputation and intention to study at graduate school.***

### ***Academic Programs***

The academic programs offered by university is a factor that should not be forgotten as well. Various studies have found that availability of programs could be considered as an important factor in affecting students' university choice decisions (Yusof *et al.*, 2008; Ivy, 2010; Sia, 2010). The authors argued that attributes such as flexibility, length of programs as well as entry requirements would be taken into consideration by students in selecting universities. In addition, O'Brien *et al.* (2007) pointed out that "pull factor" such as program content was important to students from Indian in selecting a university to apply to. Furthermore, Ismail *et al.* (2007) also mentioned that students would evaluate the programs content and quality in deciding where to study. As academic programs is considered as one of the factors that affect students' university choice; consequently, the following hypothesis can be constructed:

***H<sub>4</sub>: There is a relationship between academic programs and intention to study at graduate school.***

### ***Learning Facilities***

The significant role of learning facilities on student choice of university was discussed in Price *et al.* (2003). The authors mentioned that high-standard facilities could be considered as a relevant factor that influences the students' selection decision for higher learning institutions. In addition to the above study, Fernandez (2010), Padlee *et al.* (2010), Sia (2010) and Wagner

and Fard (2009) have also mentioned that availability of sufficient and contemporary facilities was one of the highly important considerations in choosing a university. By considering the above studies, it can be said that learning facilities do influence the students' decisions. As such, the following hypothesis is suggested:

***H<sub>5</sub>: There is a relationship between learning facilities and intention to study at graduate school.***

#### ***Family/Peers Influence***

Interpersonal influences from others, such as parents and peers, have proven to be significant to students' choice of higher education institutions. For instance, Yamamoto (2006) has found that Turkish students were highly influenced by their parents as well as family. In addition, O'Brien *et al.* (2007) have also identified that family played a crucial role in many stages of decision making for graduate studies. Other researchers who gained the similar results in their studies were such as Ivy (2010), Johnston (2010) and Wagner and Fard (2009). In short, parents and peers who provide sufficient encouragement and support to students can affect their decision directly. As a result, the following hypothesis is developed:

***H<sub>6</sub>: There is a relationship between family/peers influence and intention to study at graduate school.***

#### ***Country Image***

Gray *et al.* (2003) has identified "destination image", which included items such as political stability, country safety, country natural beauty etc., as a factor to develop university brand and attract students. In addition, Cubillo *et al.* (2006) also discussed that country image could have a great influence on the purchase intention; they further argued that country image gave the first impression to the students and it could affect the institutions chosen by them. As such, the following hypothesis is constructed:

***H<sub>7</sub>: There is a relationship between country image and intention to study at graduate school.***

### **Methodology**

#### ***Population and Sample***

The population of this research consisted of the foreign undergraduates who were studying in a public university located at the southern part of Malaysia. A total of 670 foreign undergraduates from 13 faculties were identified as the population. Thus, the sample of this study consisted of 250 students who were selected based upon stratified sampling method. Stratification of the population was performed by faculties. Furthermore, the number of sample selected was deemed appropriate as Krejcie and Morgan (1970) suggested that the sample size needed for a population consists of 700 cases should be at least 248 cases.

### ***Instrument Development and Data Collection***

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire inspired by previous researchers. Closed-ended questions were used in the questionnaire due to their ease to administer, score and code (Burns and Burns, 2008). Specifically, the questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section A was designed to gather information on respondents' demographic profiles. Section B was to determine the respondents' perceptions on institutional factors and external factors. Meanwhile, Section C was to identify the respondents' intention to study at faculties.

The data was collected through a specially designed self-administered questionnaire. This method was used in order to induce a greater number of respondents to complete the questionnaires and hence to achieve a higher response rate. In addition, it could also help to reduce the cost incurred and time spent on data gathering (Burns and Burns, 2008). All the data collected were coded into computer and analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17. Particularly, statistical analyses such as mean, standard deviation and Pearson correlation were conducted to test the hypotheses.

### **Findings**

#### ***Reliability***

Reliability test is to set the internal consistency and stability of the data collected, the closer the Cronbach's Alpha is to one, the higher the internal consistency reliability (Sekaran, 2003). From the pilot test performed, the results showed that all the variables used in the questionnaire recorded a Cronbach's Alpha value greater than 0.70, indicating that the questionnaire had internal consistency. As such, the reliability test supported the appropriateness of the instrument used in the study. Table 3 illustrates the Cronbach's Alpha of each variable.

**Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha**

<b>Variables</b>	<b><math>\alpha</math></b>	<b>No of Items</b>
Location	0.759	4
Low cost	0.778	4
University reputation	0.815	6
Academic programs	0.810	5
Learning facilities	0.788	6
Family/Peers influence	0.863	6
Country image	0.824	6
Intention to study at graduate school	0.800	6

#### ***Respondents' Profile***

Table 3 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents. It is found that majority of the respondents were male (69.2%). In terms of respondent's age, most of the respondents were between 21 to 30 years old in which 135 (54%) of them came from this group. However, there was one (0.4%) respondent above 41 years old. Majority of the respondents came from Asia, in which 7.2% of them were from South East Asia and 42.8% originated from other parts of Asia, such as West Asia, North Asia etc. Besides Asia, there were respondents originated from Africa (28.4%) and Middle East (15.6%) as well.

**Table 3: Demographic Characteristics (N=250)**

Demographic	F	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	173	69.2
Female	77	30.8
<b>Age</b>		
20 years old or younger	48	19.2
21-30 years old	135	54.0
31-40 years old	66	26.4
41 years old or older	1	0.4
<b>Region of Origin</b>		
South East Asia	18	7.2
Other parts of Asia	107	42.8
Africa	71	28.4
Middle East	39	15.6
Others	15	6.0

**Relationship between Independent and Dependent Variables**

In this study, Pearson correlation test was employed to identify whether or not there were any relationships between independent variables and dependent variable. The results are showed in Table 4.

**Table 4: Correlation Analysis**

		<b>Intention to study at graduate school</b>
<b>Location</b>	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.418** 0.000
<b>Low cost</b>	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.348** 0.000
<b>University reputation</b>	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.524** 0.000
<b>Academic programs</b>	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.470** 0.000
<b>Learning facilities</b>	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.466** 0.000
<b>Family/Peers influence</b>	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.263 0.071
<b>Country image</b>	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed)	0.571** 0.000

**\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)**

According to Elifson *et al.* (1998), correlation value (r) from 0.31 to 0.70 can be considered as having a moderate or substantial relationship between the two variables. Therefore, significant moderate relationships were found between location, low cost, university reputations, academic programs, learning facilities, country image and intention to study at graduate school. However, no significant relationship was found between family/peers influence and intention to study at graduate school.

Table 5 summarizes the results of hypotheses testing. Based upon the correlation analysis, six out of the seven hypotheses were supported. They were H<sub>1</sub>, H<sub>2</sub>, H<sub>3</sub>, H<sub>4</sub>, H<sub>5</sub> and H<sub>7</sub>. The only unsupported hypothesis was H<sub>6</sub>.

**Table 5: Results of Hypotheses Testing**

Hypotheses	Results
H <sub>1</sub> : There is a relationship between location and intention to study at graduate school.	Supported
H <sub>2</sub> : There is a relationship between low cost and intention to study at graduate school.	Supported
H <sub>3</sub> : There is a relationship between university reputation and intention to study at graduate school.	Supported
H <sub>4</sub> : There is a relationship between academic programs and intention to study at graduate school.	Supported
H <sub>5</sub> : There is a relationship between learning facilities and intention to study at graduate school.	Supported
H <sub>6</sub> : There is a relationship between family/peers influence and intention to study at graduate school.	Not supported
H <sub>7</sub> : There is a relationship between country image and intention to study at graduate school.	Supported

Thus, it is proven that student's intention to study at graduate school is affected by factors such as strategic location, reasonable educational cost, good institutional reputations or images, courses or academic programs offered, sufficient learning facilities and positive country image. Similarly, past literature has also proven that the above mentioned factors are capable of influencing the students' choice of HEIs (Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Ancheh *et al.*, 2007; O'Brien *et al.*, 2007; Wagner and Fard, 2009; Padlee *et al.*, 2010). As a result, HEI operators should stress more on the above factors in recruiting students.

However, unlike Wagner and Fard (2009), it was found that family/peers influence was not playing a significant role in influencing foreign undergraduates' intention to study at graduate school. The finding was also contrary to studies conducted by O'Brien (2007), Ivy (2010) and Johnston (2010). However, the result confirmed the study of Ismail *et al.* (2007) in which parents or friends exerted the least influence on students' choice. The phenomenon can be explained by most of the undergraduates are adults, whereby they are able to make the decisions by themselves.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

This research aims to identify the factors that influence the foreign undergraduates' intention to study at graduate school. Also, it is to verify the relationships between the influencing factors and foreign undergraduates' intention to study at graduate school. There are two main contributions of this study. First, it flourishes the current literature in the related field; second, it provides some practical contributions to the HEI operators to developed effective marketing strategies.

From the literature review, the study revealed that factors such as location, low cost, university reputations, academic programs, learning facilities, family/peers influence and

country image were able to influence the foreign undergraduates' intention to study at graduate school. There were seven hypotheses have been developed for further analysis to prove their significant relationships.

In terms of verifying the relationships between independent variables and dependent variable, the results indicated that six out of seven independent variables were having a significant moderate relationships with the dependent variable, namely (i) location; (ii) low cost; (iii) university reputations; (iv) academic programs; (v) learning facilities and; (vi) country image. Family/peers influence was the only factor that did not have any significant relationship with foreign undergraduates' intention to study at graduate school.

Based on the findings, HEI operators are urged to focus on giving more information regarding their academic programs and learning facilities to prospective students during student recruitment activities. In addition, developing a prestige institutional reputation is also vital to ensure the survival of HEIs. It is important to understand that students nowadays are keen to register with HEI with good reputation, as it will be easy for them to get employed in the future. Cost is a critical factor that should not be forgotten as well, as students are cost-conscious, HEI operators should revise their educational fees regularly and try to offer their courses at an affordable price. Selecting a strategic location for establishing a new campus or branch is also crucial in attracting and retaining students. As influence from parents and friends is considered as insignificant, it should not be over-emphasize by the HEI operators, especially in promoting their graduate schools.

Lastly, this research only studies the foreign undergraduates' intention to study at graduate school of a public university. As there is an overwhelming number of private HEIs exists in the country, future researchers can integrate the private HEIs into the studies. Furthermore, future research in a similar context is also recommended to expand the sample size and to include other statistical tests.

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